

'Literate kids start with literate adults'

By Sam Farr, Member of Congress

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For many, the path toward literacy is a straight line: pick up the fundamentals at home, learn to read in grade school, read to learn during teenage years, then apply that knowledge as an adult.

But what if just one link in that chain breaks?

When teens leave school early, they don't pick up the skills needed to succeed and find it far more difficult to locate high-paying jobs. Young adults lacking those skills are incapable of passing along basic competencies to their children. And those children then enter school unprepared to learn, perpetuating a vicious cycle of distress.

Literacy is an infinitely complex affair, a product of family and community rather than any one individual. It's the job of every single one of us to make certain all children have a fair chance to learn how to read and write. There are two main areas where we must direct our efforts: young parents and community participation.

A child's early years are integral to a literate, productive future. And the best tools we have to promote literacy among the young are literate parents. In Monterey County, we face an uphill battle. Eleven percent of adults are not literate in any language, and one in four adults reads below the 4th grade level. Our best way to reach children is through young parents, especially those ages 18 to 35.

Low levels of literacy have also been directly linked to lower wages and fewer job opportunities. Adults who lack sufficient skills will face a hostile job market and limited means for advancement. Employers seek individuals who won't need excessive training and are likely to improve their skills. The bottom line: higher paying jobs demand literate employees.

Adult literacy can also have negative effects beyond hampering the chances of success for children. Fifty-five percent of adults seeking services say lack of communication skills create a barrier, making it less likely that both adults and children will receive the services they need.

One group doing some excellent work reaching out to young parents is the Community Foundation for Monterey County. The foundation last year initiated a five-year literacy campaign to improve the level of adult literacy in Monterey County. Their efforts include important collaboration with groups including the Monterey Peninsula Foundation, First Five Monterey County, the Packard Foundation and the Mervyn Brenner Foundation. County officials also play a key role.

But what about the rest of us? How can the local community help bring this crisis under control? After all, nearly half of all children entering kindergarten in our county lack the necessary pre-academic skills to learn. There are important ways we can have an impact, and it will take a combined effort to turn this trend around.

Our teachers are doing their best to make sure these children catch up and are afforded every opportunity to succeed. They're doing a great job, and deserve much support and congratulations for their work. We must continue to support literacy goals in our schools, we must continue to help our children succeed. But we can't stop there.

Local business and other funders should make literacy a top priority and participate in the work started by the Community Foundation. It's in the best interest of all of us to foster a literate society. But you can also make a difference without spending a dime. Adult literacy programs are constantly searching for volunteers who are passionate about adult literacy. And at the very least, we should spread the word about these programs, help get others involved, and publicize this most important cause.

If we are to truly have a lasting effect on the levels of literacy in our community, we must work together to address deficiencies in adult literacy. It's a noble cause, and one that I am very proud to support.

(Rep. Farr represents California's 17th District in the U.S. House of Representatives.)